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ABSTRACT

Drawing data from 20 school districts in 8 states, this study assessed the collective impact of federal categorical programs and related civil rights mandates on 6 problem areas in local school districts. Interviews with a variety of respondents in local districts focused on the federal laws' effects on instructional services for target students, possible instructional fragmentation, degrees of interruption or impoverishment of regular classroom programs, influences on school management procedures, and district-level decision-making. Conclusions and policy implications reflect the cumulative effects of federal policy. (JW)

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CUMULATIVE EFFECTS OF FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICIES ON SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS

Summary Report of a Congressionally Mandated Study

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how schools and school districts have been affected by federal laws that share the broad purpose of improving educational opportunities for target groups of children and youth. The study explored effects in three areas: instructional services for targeted groups; organizational and administrative features of schools and school districts; and local decisionmaking. The study did not assess the implementation of each program but instead looked for effects attributable to the sum total of many programs and mandates operating over time. Conclusions are based on case studies of 20 school districts (and within them, 81 elementary and secondary schools) across 8 states.

The following major conclusions emerge from this study:

- Federal (and state) policies for special populations have substantially improved and expanded the array of educational services for the intended target students.
- These policies have increased the procedural and structural complexity of schools and districts; this appears to represent a necessary consequence of providing targeted services.
- Over time, local problem solving, federal and state policy adjustments, and gradual local accommodation have generally reduced the costs associated with special services to a manageable level.

From these conclusions, several key implications for federal policy makers can be drawn:

- Collectively, federal actions can make a substantial difference in local educational practice and can achieve their intended purposes.
- Some administrative inefficiency is the price paid for providing a variety of targeted, publicly accountable services. Federal actions to diminish these costs risk reducing the benefits as well.
- Federal policy initiatives "settle in" gradually at the local level; programs work better and cause fewer implementation problems over the long term than in the first few years after a policy is promulgated.
- Federal policy must recognize and encourage the local problem-solving and intergovernmental negotiation that develop around programs and that ultimately determine the quality of services.

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STUDY FOCUS AND APPROACH

This study examined the cumulative effects of a number of federal categorical programs and related civil rights mandates on schools and school districts.* The federal laws share the broad purpose of improving the educational opportunities for target groups of children and youth, although they vary in their more specific aims and provisions. SRI's study is one of several supported by the School Finance Project, a research effort mandated by Congress in 1978** during a period of policy interest in school finance reform and equality of educational opportunity.

In particular, we investigated the influences of:

- Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA)* of 1965, (now Chapter 1 of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981);
- P.L. 94-142, *The Education for All Handicapped Children Act* of 1975;
- ESEA Title VII, the *Bilingual Education Act* of 1968;
- The 1968 amendments to the *Vocational Education Act (VEA)*, set-aside provisions for the handicapped and disadvantaged;
- Civil Rights Laws — *Title VI* of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, *Title IX* of the Education Amendments of 1972, and *Section 504* of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Where parallel laws or programs existed at the state level, they, too, were included in the scope of research. Other laws that directly or indirectly target resources to special populations — the IndoChina Refugee Children Assistance Act, the Indian Education Act, and the Emergency School Aid Assistance Act (ESAA) — were included but played a less central role in the study. The Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981, which subsumes and amends Title I, ESEA, and which combines ESAA and a host of smaller categorical programs into a block grant distributed to all districts, was not in effect at the time of our fieldwork. Local personnel were anticipating its implementation, however, and we have reported their responses to it where pertinent to our findings.

The SRI study was designed to assess the collective impact of these laws on: students' access to instructional services within elementary and secondary schools; the organization and administration of schools and districts; and local decisionmaking. We sought to understand, from the local perspective, what difference the full array of federal policies made to schools and to districts as these policies accumulated over time, interacting with each other and with local programs. Ultimately, we were seeking to understand, in broad qualitative terms, the "costs," "benefits" and associated tradeoffs of the federal programs and mandates, as local educators perceived them.

We should mention here what we did not do in this study. We did not assess the implementation of each of the programs studied; instead, we looked for the broader effects attributable to the sum total of many programs and mandates operating over time. Nor did we look at the effects of programs and mandates on student achievement outcomes. Interviewees sometimes cited test scores as evidence of program benefits, but this was not a systematic focus of our inquiry. In the context of current interest in improving the quality of schools, readers might also assume we addressed the question of whether the caliber of our nation's schools has improved. We did

*For a more detailed description of the study and its findings, the reader is referred to the full report: Knapp, Michael S., Marian S. Stearns, Brenda J. Turnbull, Jane L. David, and Susan M. Peterson, "Cumulative Effects of Federal Education Policies on Schools and Districts," Menlo Park, CA: SRI International, January 1983.

**P.L. 95-851 (Section 1203), The Education Amendments of 1978.

not. The concern embodied in the laws we studied was that certain groups were deprived of educational opportunities; we studied the effects, intended and unintended, of federal efforts to improve that situation.

Topics for Research

Educators, policymakers, and the research community have debated various issues about targeted categorical aid and service mandates since the inception of these policies. In recent years, concern has coalesced in six areas that imply or raise questions about federal policy effects at the local level:

- *Instructional services for target students* — Are the services judged appropriate? Are they reaching the intended targets?
- *Fragmentation vs. coordination of instruction* — Is there a problem? How has it been addressed?
- *Influences on the regular classroom and core instructional program* — Do the services provided for target students influence the regular classroom or detract from the resources available for other students?
- *Systematic approaches to instructional management* — Do school and district staff assess needs, plan programs for individual students, or evaluate results more systematically? How elaborate are the procedures they use? How useful?
- *Administrative burden* — Have the requirements and administrative details of special programs hindered local professionals or detracted from instructional time?
- *Local decisionmaking* — Has local discretion been reduced? Has power shifted within districts?

Numerous criticisms have been leveled at the structure of categorical programs and mandates, accompanied by calls for diverse reforms—including elimination of federal education laws, consolidation or deregulation of programs, or the transformation of categorical programs into undifferentiated block grants. Our purpose was to improve the base of information related to such proposals by exploring the asserted "negative" and "positive" influences of federal programs.

Methods and Sample

We investigated cumulative effects through a multiple case design in a sample of twenty school districts across eight states.* Guided by the research topics described above, we collected data primarily through focused, open-ended interviews with a variety of respondents at school and district levels. Data were systematically analyzed through a two-stage process: the first stage yielded case reports on each individual site and the second an analysis of patterns across all sites.

We selected districts and schools within them to maximize variation on the factors most likely to influence the cumulative effects of targeted federal policies. States varied on the number and type of state categorical programs and related mandates aimed at special needs students, the characteristic relationship between state education agency and school districts, and state wealth and demography. Within these states, districts were selected so that they varied in size and setting, concentration and diversity of special-needs students, number and type of categorical programs, fiscal strength, leadership style and orientation toward special populations. Within each district, two to five elementary schools were chosen and one or two high schools, depending on the size of the district. All together, the sample included 56 elementary and 25 high schools. Schools were not chosen to represent the full range of conditions within their respective districts, but rather the types of situations federal policies would be most likely to influence — that is, schools ranged from those with at least some students from one or more target groups to those with heavy, diverse concentrations of these students.

*California, Florida, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Mexico, Ohio, Wyoming.

FINDINGS IN REVIEW

Our review of findings emphasizes general tendencies across sites. While numerous variations and exceptions occurred (and have been noted where especially important), there were many consistent patterns, despite the wide range of conditions across the study sample. The reader is referred to the full report for more detail on the exceptions to the general patterns we report below.

Instructional Services for Target Students

We found that students who are intended to benefit from federal programs and mandates generally do receive special services in some degree tailored to their individual needs. The services are most often provided by staff who are specifically trained to handle the target students' learning needs and who could not or would not have been hired without federal funds and targeting requirements.

With few exceptions, teachers and administrators said these services are more appropriate than the instruction the students would have received in the absence of any federal intervention. Where there were negative comments about the special services, they reflected individual teachers' or administrators' judgment that particular special staff were not competent; that program entry or exit requirements were inflexible; or that the design of the instruction was inappropriate (for example, bilingual education drew some philosophical criticism).

Students commonly spend time outside their regular classrooms in order to receive special instruction. According to some educational philosophies, this is undesirable on its face. However, many respondents pointed out to us that classroom instruction does not meet students' needs. Missing "regular reading" to go to a pull-out class often means missing little because the regular class is far beyond the target student's achievement level. Participation in the regular classroom all day long is generally thought more likely to confuse and frustrate a student with special needs than to convey an instructional experience.

Most of the people we interviewed insisted, and apparently believe, that their schools are providing supplementary instruction for target students, "over and above" the regular program. In a strictly logical sense, this is untrue. A student pulled out for special instruction always misses something, even if it is only recess. However, most classroom teachers told us that the target students are receiving something extra and worthwhile in their pull-out classes.

We also found that special services are targeted — that is, they serve the students they are supposed to serve and are not spread around to all students. People in all districts and schools said that other students could benefit from special resources also, but they usually obey the requirements that defined target categories of students.

Instructional Fragmentation vs. Coordination

We looked for evidence that the instructional programs offered to target students are or are not fragmented — that is, whether learning may be impeded because students suffer interruptions of the school day (e.g., by attending pull-out classes) or are taught by different methods. In many districts and schools, we heard that this has been a major problem in the past. The great majority of these districts and schools have, however, taken steps to address the problem. They have limited interruptions of the classroom program (including local activities such as band practice) and have simplified school schedules so that the comings and goings for each classroom are

minimized. Indeed, in their desire to reduce fragmentation they often limit the special instructional services which students may receive (even though the students may be entitled to more).

Schools and districts also now address the problem of fragmentation by coordinating the content of instruction offered under different programs. Classroom teachers are often given the responsibility of orchestrating the special services, for example, by specifying what skills a particular child should work on each week. Specialist teachers are encouraged by their program directors to stay in close touch with classroom teachers. Partially as a result of these efforts, classroom teachers' sense of responsibility for target students seems generally undiminished by the presence of specialists.

At an organizational level, we studied the influence of federal policies on "administrative fragmentation," often asserted to contribute to problems of instructional coordination. We found that the presence of staff with different class loads and instructional approaches initially increased the potential for misunderstanding and conflict among school staff. However, over time these issues have been worked out in most cases. At the district level, federal policies have been partly responsible for administrative structures in which separate units or people oversee segments of the instructional program. Interdivision relationships are complicated by this fact, but the level of rivalry and friction is relatively low. We could detect little adverse impact of district organizational arrangements on school functioning. Once again, at both school and district levels, there is evidence across all types of sites that local efforts to combat problems of administrative fragmentation have reduced these problems to a manageable level.

These efforts have not been successful everywhere. In some schools, no one has taken much initiative to coordinate services. Turf jealousies at the district level have sometimes impeded coordination. Where they occur, schoolwide morale problems have made the initial frictions between special and core staff difficult to resolve. However, these instances of persisting fragmentation are exceptions to a more general rule: solving the problems associated with special services is largely a matter of local leadership, resolve, and time.

Effects on the Regular Classroom and the Core Instructional Program

We investigated the unintended effects of federal programs and mandates on the core instructional program of schools and districts: do nontarget students suffer interruption or impoverishment of their program, or is it enhanced? For the most part, we found few substantial effects of either sort. Although nontarget students may be distracted from their work by the comings and goings of classmates served in pull-out classes, teachers reported that the disruption is minimal once the scheduling routines have been worked out. Some classroom teachers lose instructional time due to matters related to special services (e.g., special education placement meetings), but this is not considered to be a major problem. A number of classroom teachers noted also that they gave more attention to nontarget students when the "difficult to reach" were out of the room. The presence of specialized staff and materials sometimes produced spillover benefits for nontarget students, but this seems minimal, due to widespread compliance with the federal targeting requirements.

There are hints, however, of more pervasive and longterm forms of beneficial spillover as well as more serious negative effects. In some sites new ideas and practices were first introduced through federal programs. On the other hand, in districts where strong state enforcement of service mandates coincides with fiscal strains, we heard that the regular program budget has suffered. District officials in these states acknowledged that they are making some cutbacks in services for nontarget students, such as a small increase in class sizes. In these cases, federal and state mandates have forced tradeoffs among groups of students.

Systematic Approaches to Instructional Management

Many federal laws specify procedures for planning, needs assessment, and evaluation. These are intended to stimulate systematic thinking and accountability at the local level, with an ultimate result of more individually appropriate services for students.

We found that the use of systematic procedures has indeed increased over time. Programs for individual students in all target groups were developed with the aid of formalized procedures (such as tests, assessments, and meetings).

The overall management of special services at the district level is similarly marked by systematic planning, program evaluations, and needs assessments. Although not all districts implement these procedures with equal zeal, all types of districts we visited use them to some degree. While we could not judge for ourselves whether students benefited from this state of affairs, many school and district staff (especially the managers of special programs) asserted that they do.

Respondents disagreed about the educational merit of systematic approaches or their usefulness in local program management. Proponents noted that systematic assessment and placement procedures got the "right" students into special services. Critics cited logistical problems (e.g., delays in handling referral for special services) as evidence. Nonetheless, there seems to be a widespread feeling that systematic procedures of some sort represent good professional practice — a trend in the way people think about education which the federal role appears to have reinforced.

It seems unlikely that instructional management at either the student or district level would be approached as systematically in the absence of the federal role. People in schools and districts view many of these systematic procedures as devices for accountability to distant authorities in Washington and state capitals. Most of them accept the need for such accountability as a condition of receiving outside funds.

Administrative Burden

Closely related to the topic of systematic procedures is that of administrative burden — paperwork, extra meetings, and other administrative chores. We gave special attention to chores that took up the time of key core program staff (principals, classroom teachers, directors of curriculum). Although it is clear that special services have generated a great deal of administrative detail and some sense of burden, we found fewer complaints than we expected.

The people who deal with the administrative detail tend to be those whose salaries are paid out of special program funds, especially program managers in the district office and teaching specialists or aides in the school. In all but the smallest districts, such people handle most of the administrative chores related to federal and state programs, thus minimizing the burden on classroom teachers and principals. Few core staff we interviewed said they resent the administrative burden related to special programs, feeling instead that the outside funds are adequate to cover the work. The instances of serious burden seem restricted to particular roles and situations: locally paid counselors who take on special education management unwillingly; schools in which the principal has no "extra pair of hands" to help with the administrative detail; hard-pressed districts facing major, nonroutine challenges attributable to federal policies (e.g., desegregation).

We also found that most of the burden associated with any particular law seem to diminish drastically after the first year or two of the law's implementation. For example, teachers and administrators can remember their early struggles with individualized educational programs (IEPs) for the handicapped, but in only a few sites do they still find these plans burdensome. Familiarity has made the requirements seem less formidable, and district staff have routinized and streamlined the work involved.

Local Decisionmaking

Despite the conventional wisdom that categorical programs and mandates tie the hands of local decisionmakers, we found a more complicated picture. It does not make sense to look at effects on something called local discretion because school districts contain varying interests and viewpoints — some of which are strengthened by federal requirements.

Local staff who take the role of advocate for target students have gained power, often because service mandates and civil rights laws give them legal backing, and because their detailed knowledge of

federal requirements strengthens their hand in local policy debates. District staff members have, in general, gained power over what goes on in schools because they have authority to oversee compliance with outside requirements. However, principals' discretion has increased, too, because their school programs have become more complicated; outside resources and special services increase the number of matters on which a principal can make decisions. In a similar way, the occasions for educators at all levels of the system to exercise discretion have multiplied as the complexity of the instructional program has grown.

Few, if any, community members who speak for target students have gained a foothold in district or school decisionmaking. Parents of handicapped students have leverage because of the service mandate and due process requirements, and some of them use this leverage very effectively. Advisory councils, however, have very little access to decisionmaking.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Across these findings, three general conclusions emerge that have important implications for federal policy:

- Collectively, federal and state policies for special populations have substantially improved and expanded the array of educational services for the intended target students.
- These policies have increased the structural complexity of schools and districts, which appears to represent a necessary consequence of providing targeted services.
- Over time, local problem solving, federal and state policy adjustments, and gradual local accommodation have generally reduced the costs associated with special services to a manageable level.

Each of these reflects a major cumulative effect of federal policy. We discuss the reasons for these effects, including state and local actions and general professional trends as well as federal actions. Finally, we point out why the effects are important to policymakers.

Change in the Array of Local Educational Services

Federal programs and mandates for target students have been translated into educational services that are, by and large, perceived to be appropriate and targeted on the "right" students. In all types of districts and schools, educators told us that federal resources have permitted them to offer more and better services to the wide range of students that fall in one or another target group. They reported that federal requirements have increased the concentration of resources on special-needs students and have helped reduce discrimination against such students. Moreover, the presence of multiple federal and state programs has increased the total pool of resources to work with. While these changes have not been equally extensive in every district and school, the direction of the changes is consistent across our sample.

Together, the federal and state initiatives for special populations present local educators with an accumulation of options that apply to large numbers of students. In districts heavily impacted by poverty and diverse needs, the expansion in educational services affects most students; in other districts varying proportions benefit. In short, the effects we describe add up to a considerable expansion of instructional capabilities at the local level.

Many federal and state actions work together to bring about the change discussed here. Although we tried to distinguish the effects of specific program provisions, this effort was not fruitful. There do not seem to be particular federal requirements that consistently achieve their aims better than others. Instead, the important local effects of federal policy appear to stem from the combination of many federal and state policy tools, including funds, goal statements, program requirements, and sanctions. These tools operate as follows:

- The funds available under categorical programs pay for a large share of the special staff and materials that serve target students. Funds also provide federal leverage for a more subtle reason. Local administrators and teachers, feeling that they have made a bargain with the federal government, comply with rules because compliance is what Washington expects in exchange for its money.
- Federal statements of purpose have a profound effect on schools and districts. The mere existence of a federal law draws attention to an area of educational need and helps to mobilize the local supporters of the law's purpose, notably the local advocates for target groups.
- Federal requirements communicate what types of local practices are or are not acceptable. The specific practices developed to comply with requirements vary among states and districts because they reflect varying interpretations developed by administrators at those levels. However, we found ample evidence that most districts and schools would spread their resources more thinly, with more resources going to "average" and gifted students, if it were not for the prohibitions conveyed by the federal requirements.
- The existence of sanctions strongly reinforces the effects of the other policy tools. The prospect of a visit from auditors, let alone an audit exception, exerts powerful leverage on local behavior.

Some readers may be surprised by the magnitude and consistency of the effects of federal policy

found in this study. A decade or so of research on program implementation has created skepticism about whether federal programs can possibly have their intended effects at the local level. We think there are three explanations for this apparent discrepancy between our findings and the implementation literature — the nature of the questions we set out to answer, the nature of the programs we studied, and the timeframe for research.

Our research questions focused on broad effects, with relatively little attention to the details of local practice in each program. Had we looked at the way each program provision was carried out, as implementation studies of single programs have done, we would have found far more variability at the state, district, and school levels. We certainly would have found variability in the answers to questions like, "How is the Title I target population defined?" or "What does an IEP look like?" However, the much broader changes attributable to federal programs, such as the existence of increased specialized instruction for target students, were consistent across our sample.

The second reason for the strong and consistent effects we found has to do with the programs studied. Some important implementation studies have dealt with programs that accorded a great deal of discretion to local participants. The "Change Agent" study, often cited as evidence that federal programs have weak and variable local effects, dealt with programs that involved very limited federal rules and monitoring.* The programs and mandates considered in our study, however, have been designed and administered in a deliberate effort to bring about local compliance.

Third, unlike much of the implementation research, this study dealt with programs that are no longer new. The policies on which we focused had all been in place for a number of years (18 in the case of Title I) by the time of our field visits. Over time, local variations have probably diminished.

Our conclusion for policymakers is that federal actions can, indeed, make a substantial difference in local educational practice and can accomplish their intended purposes. Despite the vagaries of state and local handling of specific program provisions, the overall effects of federal involvement in the education of target students have been relatively clear and consistent. A sustained federal presence — comprising funds, goal statements, requirements, and sanctions, and enlisting state and local administrators as participants in the effort — turns out to have more of an effect on school programs than many people would think.

Structural Complexity in Local Systems

Our second broad conclusion is that federal policies have increased the structural complexity of schools and districts, which have developed more administrative apparatus to handle the staff, rules, and procedures that come with special programs. These changes take somewhat different forms at the school and the district level, but at both levels the increased complexity appears to represent a necessary local consequence of providing targeted services.

Schools now house more differentiated and specialized staff, a wider array of materials, and more special settings in which students receive individual or small-group services. Instructional programs for individual students have more separate components. The increase in program planning for individual students means that teachers' and aides' activities are more formally structured and documented.

At the district level, the increases in complexity stem largely from the need to achieve and demonstrate compliance with multiple sets of requirements. Rules from the federal and state levels must be attended to, and they must be turned into local procedural guidelines. District staff have to monitor practices in the schools to make sure the guidelines are understood and followed. They must follow a whole raft of procedures to document program planning and funds allocation — applications, reports, special financial accounting systems, record keeping, needs assessments, evaluation, and so on. Other procedural requirements have been set up to make the district accountable to local audiences, including the parents of handicapped students and the advisory councils that represent other target groups.

The structural complexity at the school and district reflects a fundamental trade-off. On the one hand, target students gain, educators get help with their most difficult teaching problems, and the responsiveness of the system to a diverse clientele increases. On the other hand, students' instructional

*Berman, Paul and Milbrey M. McLaughlin, *Federal Program Supporting Educational Change, Vol. VIII: Implementing and Sustaining Innovations*, Report R-1589/8-HEW. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 1978.

programs lose some things, and an element of inefficiency is introduced into the system.

For students, the school-level changes mean that they can receive tailored services and individual attention from adults, often from specialists. Needs assessment and program planning result in a better match between student needs and program services. However, the students who participate in special services inevitably miss something in the core instructional program. They may lose some stability in instruction, and they are likely to experience the strain of following a complicated daily routine.

For the adults in the school, there are more ways to handle difficult learning (and disciplinary) problems, more occasions to communicate with parents, and more people to turn to for advice or support. Nonetheless, the time necessary to coordinate the components of the instructional program may be time taken away from working with students (this is more true of specialists than classroom teachers). Furthermore, the presence of specialists raises issues of staff relations that take time to resolve.

For the staff at the district office, the new resources and associated requirements give them leverage over problems they were formerly unable to solve as well. But they pay a price in terms of staff time and the intricacy of administering an instructional program subdivided into many parts. The growth in numbers of administrative staff makes decisionmaking more cumbersome. Their responsiveness to the school may also suffer somewhat in the process.

The costs associated with all the school and district administrative procedures are clearly substantial, although impossible to tally precisely. When considered in isolation, these costs are an easy target for complaints and calls for reform. But the costs are difficult to eliminate. Efforts to reduce them may diminish the associated benefits as well.

Administrative inefficiency is probably an inevitable result of the variety of services offered and the increase in the districts' accountability. As the student population includes more and more formerly unserved groups, increases in the variety of instruction and associated complications are unavoidable. And as local, state, and federal audiences require the presence of targeted services for special-needs students, some explicit rules and procedures (though not necessarily those now in place) are necessary. District officials recognize not only that the rules and procedures generate more work but also protect them by defining clearly what is expected of them and the schools.

When policymakers consider the disadvantages of the increased complexity in schools and districts, they should remember the problems that the complex arrangements were set up to solve. Without specialized, differentiated instructional services in schools, target students might languish in inappropriate "regular" instruction. Without formal mechanisms for coordinating these programs, fragmentation could predominate in the schools. And without rules and procedures for accountability, there would be no assurance that schools and districts were adequately attending to target students.

Settling in Over Time

Across most of the issue areas we investigated, we heard that matters have improved over time. Services for target students have become more appropriate; instructional fragmentation has been reduced; administrative burdens are being handled more efficiently; program managers have been stopped from building empires. Although problem-solving efforts have not been uniformly vigorous or successful across sites, we found at least some reported trend toward improvement in every site. It seemed attributable to a combination of factors, including active local responses to the problems associated with federal policies, policy adjustments at the federal and state levels, and gradual familiarization with federal initiatives.

People in most schools and school districts have responded actively to the problems that have accompanied categorical programs and mandates, taking steps to combat these problems. The problem solving includes district policies (e.g., limiting the number of pull-outs for each student), school policies (e.g., rescheduling to facilitate staff interaction), and individual actions (e.g., conversations between teachers who share students). Local educators also respond to local problems by complaining about them to federal and state authorities, in hopes of changing the policies they hold responsible for the problems. A more passive resistance also takes place as problematic requirements are reinterpreted and streamlined.

In response to complaints and perceived deficiencies in the programs, federal and state governments have made adjustments in policies. For exam-

ple, the 1978 amendments to Title I allowed special staff to share in bus duty, cafeteria duty, and the like, thus easing the tension among staff in many schools. Recent changes in several states' special education laws were credited in various sites with alleviating some difficulties.

The sustained presence of federal programs and mandates has meant that, apart from any efforts to mitigate problems, people have become used to the laws, have come to understand them better or fear them less, or have simply forgotten what a school was like without targeted instruction. (Many younger staff members have never known it any other way.) Simultaneously, the specialized staff appear to have become more experienced, less threatening, and probably more useful to their schools. Finally, perhaps through repetition alone, the key principles underlying program rules seem to have sunk in and become part of local ways of doing things.

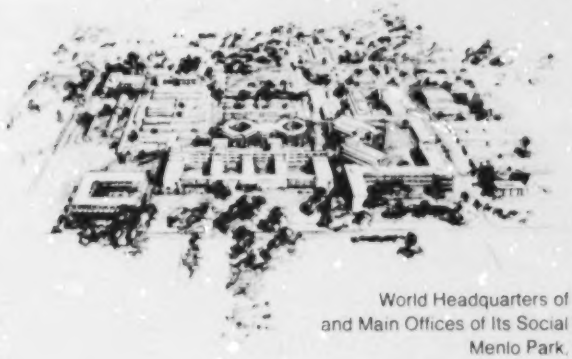
Another factor contributing to the generally positive perception of local cumulative effects may have been the shift in the terms of the policy debate in Washington. Many of our respondents, aware that major reductions in the federal role in education were being considered, made a point of telling us that they would hate to see such reductions take place. We do not think these comments are best understood as simple nostalgia for a federal role that seemed to be disappearing—in short, a "bias" distorting the "true" picture. Aware of the new policy debate, people who thought the local burdens of the federal role outweighed the benefits would have wanted to express that opinion to us so that we would pass it along to policymakers. Yet we heard very few such comments, even from the people with no vested interest in the special programs (classroom teachers, principals, superintendents, and school board members). Instead, most people seemed to have weighed the pros and cons of the federal programs and to have concluded that the benefits warranted their speaking up in favor of the programs.

Still, the tendency for programs to settle in over time suggests one limitation of relying on local perceptions in this kind of research. Just as the perception of a very new program will probably exaggerate its defects, the perception of a long-standing program or set of programs may well exaggerate its benefits. Another limitation on local perceptions has to do with frame of reference. While our respondents could compare special programs with regular classroom instruction, drawing on their knowledge of the way these services work now, they had trouble imagining alternative service arrangements. For example, they were unsure what services might be provided with the same level of funds but different federal regulations (since many state, district, and school decisions would shape these services).

There is an important countervailing trend to the generally positive picture of changes over time. In the sites where strong service mandates are combined with strained resources, the perception of the burdensome aspects of federal policy seems to be growing. Dwindling funds at the local, state, and federal levels create problems that are extremely hard to solve. A few of our sites have begun to make small cuts in the services offered to nontarget students. When the overall pie is shrinking and target students are protected by service mandates, such cuts are inevitable. Fiscal trends at all levels of government suggest that this problem will become more widespread and severe in the near future, and that it warrants attention from policymakers.

The fact that programs tend to settle in more comfortably over time, barring new financial problems, should not be taken as an admonition to policy makers to leave the current federal role unchanged. Changes are obviously necessary as national problems and needs shift. However, knowing how local perceptions change over time can help in setting expectations for the effects of new initiatives. The short-term result of almost any policy change will be local resistance, confusion, and poorly organized services. Over a few years, things work better, and the true merits of a policy initiative can be assessed more realistically. (In the longer term, it may be that any initiative comes to be viewed as indispensable at the local level.)

Finally, policy makers should recognize and encourage the local problem solving and intergovernmental negotiation that develop around programs. The flexibility allowed for local decisionmaking in designing, managing, and delivering services is what accounts in large part for the quality of the educational services provided under federal programs and mandates.



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